STREET SPIRIT

Volume 16, No. 05 May 2010 $1.00

A publication of the American Friends Service Committee

JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Media Ignores Huge March for California's Future

by Margot Pepper

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — César Chávez Day came and went without acknowledgment from most mainstream print media of a Chávez-inspired, 365-mile march that lasted 48 days and culminated in thousands of Californians converging upon the State Capitol on April 21.

Wave after wave of union workers, educators, students and parents demanded funding for basic services that citizens in developed nations expect for their tax dollars, such as functioning schools, roads and parks. Berkeley's teachers and unions worked together to fill five buses to attend the protest. The rally honored those who walked from Bakersfield to Sacramento, in the footsteps of Cesar Chavez, in the March for California's Future.

The route was 25 miles longer than the march originally led by César Chávez in 1966 from Delano to Sacramento to protest growers' deliberate spraying of striking farmworkers with lethal pesticides. The 1966 march led to a powerful wave of organizing that brought historic victories to the farmworkers' movement.

"Most of the farmworkers' energy was focused on the grape boycott. At its height, more than 14 million Americans helped by not buying grapes. The pressure was irresistible, and the Delano growers signed historic contracts with UFWOC in 1969," observed PBS filmmaker Rick Tejada-Flores in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas*.

The March for California's Future mobilized thousands in a massive demonstration for economic justice. Mark Copelan photo

The recent March for California's Future began in Bakersfield on March 5 with the aim of safeguarding the future of California's students, the infirm and elderly, and protesting the severely deteriorated quality of life faced by the majority of Californians.

The core group of marchers that reached the finish line included a San Diego college professor, a Los Angeles probation officer and a Bay Area community organizer. They endured rain and heat, and slept in churches, schools and RV parks, according to Lori Abbott (PNS) in the *San Jose Mercury News*. While mention of the march can be found on the websites at the Huffington Post and KPBS, the San Jose Mercury News was the only established print media outlet that followed the story in any depth.

See **March for California's Future** *page 5*

Cast Adrift in the Wake of the Great Recession

by Robert L. Terrell

This is a period of escalating desperation for many U.S. citizens. Despite recent improvement in the stock market, and scattered signs that the national economy is beginning to expand, the severe human devastation engendered by the recent recession still casts a heavy pall of fear and suffering over every section of the nation.

Major municipalities, from San Francisco to New York City, are experiencing massive financial problems. The same is true of many states, including California, whose residents took pride not too long ago in the fact that the state's economy was larger than that of all but five of the world's nations.

At the time, the state's coffers were filled with billions of surplus dollars. This is no longer the case. As a matter of fact, many financial experts are asserting that California is currently on the verge of bankruptcy.

Nowadays, many public offices in California are closed at least four working days per month because of the state's massive financial shortfall. Prisoners are being released early, and many of those employed by the State of California are currently being paid 10 percent less than they were a year ago due to mandatory reductions in their salaries.

See **The Great Recession** *page 8*

"No Food. No Job. No Home. No Money." The plight of 3.5 million homeless people ignored by society. Robert L. Terrell photo

The fervent passion that government officials displayed when the big banks and Wall Street were threatened with collapse is nowhere to be seen when it comes to addressing the financial morass which entraps hapless members of the middle and lower classes.

Sidewalks Are for People: Defying the Sit/Lie Laws

Latino day laborers likened Newsom's sit/lie law — and the way it profiles the homeless poor — to the feared Arizona law allowing police to profile and arrest people purely because they are Latino.

Protesters create art, play, sing, share meals and reclaim public sidewalks on a day of defiant resistance to Newsom's sit/lie law.

Story and photo by Carol Harvey

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, April 24, San Franciscans participated in a second "Sidewalks Are For People" event, having fun with friends and neighbors at 17 locations all over town, by colorfully defying and resisting Mayor Gavin Newsom's plan to banish homeless people from sidewalks.

In the face of Mayor Newsom's and SFPD Chief George Gascón's "sit/lie" proposal to criminalize sitting or lying on sidewalks between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., people reclaimed public spaces by barbecuing, playing frisbee, performing poetry, eating cookies, chalking art on the cement, strumming guitars, singing, lounging "on the dangerous sidewalks of the Haight" (according to one tongue-in-cheek, online invitation), or just plain partying.

The first "Sidewalks Stand Against Sit/Lie" citywide flashmob on March 27, received national and international attention from the *Huffington Post,* the *UK Independent,* and CBC radio. [See "Reclaiming Public Spaces, Resisting Sit/Lie Laws," *Street Spirit,* April 2010.]

BBC World Service radio hosted a debate on April 4 between Andy Blue, the event coordinator with Nato Green, and Ted Lowenberg, president of the Haight Ashbury Improvement Association, who solidly supports the sit/lie proposal.

The law was introduced with the support of Haight Street business people as a supposed method to curtail recent incidents of "intimidation" by a group of Haight street "thugs." However, anti-sit/lie activists claim the proposal's real agenda is to target marginalized groups, homeless youth, and young "crust punks" traveling to post-hippie San Francisco.

These young people bring color to the Haight. They also face the same harsh conditions as homeless people citywide, most of whom are forced to carry their belongings on their backs and must eventually sit down to rest. Newsom's law would ban their very presence and criminalize their attempts to rest.

An ominous note was struck during the action on April 24 by Latino day laborers who sit and lie on city streets waiting for work. They lined Cesar Chavez Street between Mission and Van Ness, likening Newsom's sit/lie law to the recent Arizona ban on undocumented immigrants, a law allowing police to profile and arrest people purely because they are Latino.

California Republican Brian Bilbray told Chris Matthews of MSNBC's

See **Resisting Sit/Lie Laws** *page 6*

Housing Officials Charged with Conflict of Interest *in Plan to Terminate Berkeley's Public Housing*

by Lynda Carson

Berkeley — On Friday, April 23, Carole Norris, ICF International's vice president and consultant, stationed at the multinational's corporate office in San Francisco, traveled to the North Berkeley Senior Center to push for the termination of Berkeley's public housing program, from her lofty position as the Chair of the Berkeley Housing Authority (BHA).

BHA Chair Carole Norris of ICF International initiated the actions to terminate Berkeley's public housing program, privatize Berkeley's 75 public housing units, and leverage financing for the privatization scheme by grabbing much-needed Section 8 voucher subsidies from the poor. The BHA is expecting approval from HUD to dispose of its public housing units by May or June, 2010.

In recent months, Berkeley's public housing residents have gone to the City Council to protest the scheme to privatize their homes, and stated that a conflict of interest exists with the position of Norris as a BHA commissioner. They also demanded the resignations of BHA Executive Director Tia Ingram and BHA Chair Norris.

A conflict of interest exists because Norris is beholden to ICF International and its shareholders, despite her position as Chair of the BHA Commission.

Wells Capital Management Inc., a wholly-owned subsidiary of Wells Fargo Bank, is a major institutional shareholder of ICF International. In recent months, BHA consultants have been directed to contact Margaret Schrand of Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco regarding financing for the privatization scheme. If all goes as planned, BHA Chair Norris, ICF International, and Wells Fargo all stand to profit financially by the dismantling of Berkeley's public housing program, and the privatization of 75 townhouse-style public housing units.

Highly paid consultants Erik Novak and Scott Jepsen of EJP/Praxis Consulting Groups, were also at the April 23 meeting of the BHA commissioners, as was Jon Gresley, the soon-to-retire executive director of the Oakland Housing Authority (OHA), one of a few controversial, experimental Move to Work (MTW) Public Housing Authorities that do not have to abide by the normal federal laws protecting federally subsidized low-income renters in the nation's 3,000-plus public housing authorities.

"I feel so sad that I am being displaced from my housing, and everyone else feels the same way. I've lived here for over 18 years, and I am afraid to say anything that might anger the housing authority." — Carolyn Evans, public housing tenant

The trio of consultants, along with ICF International consultant Norris, promoted their sales pitch to convince the BHA's full board of commissioners to follow through with the plan to terminate and privatize Berkeley's public housing.

OHA Executive Director Gresley was involved in the controversy over the notorious one-strike policy, when the OHA moved to evict four innocent, elderly public housing residents for alleged crimes they did not commit. The resulting legal struggle was fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court by Anne Omura of the Eviction Defense Center, and a team of 26 local attorneys defending the rights of Oakland's public housing residents in 2002.

The April 23 vote to pass Agenda Item B of the BHA's Action Calendar was part of a series of votes orchestrated by the corporate consultants that have infiltrated the BHA, in their crusade to dismantle public housing.

Berkeley public housing residents had authorized low-income tenant Keith Carlisle to speak on their behalf at the April 23 meeting of the BHA, but he was cut short by BHA commissioners while doing his best to speak-out against the scheme to terminate public housing.

According to the July 2009, BHA consultants report, 86.5 percent of the BHA's public housing tenants are African-American, and all are low-income.

During a phone interview on April 29 with Berkeley public housing resident Rhonda Rogers, she said, "My hair is standing on my head. They are trying to find any way possible to evict us. This thing has been wrecking our lives, and we have been under a lot of pressure. They have been combing through my records and have been trying to find a reason to kick me out. There was an inspection last week, and there was another one this week."

Many longtime public housing residents say that the months of uncertainty while they face eviction and displacement has created a great deal of stress and turmoil in their lives.

"It's stressing me out," Rogers said. "It's sad. I've been a public housing resident for 12 years in Berkeley, and they are treating us horribly. I'm under pressure to accept a Section 8 voucher, which I do not want because I will have to pay more for rent than I do currently, and I'm only getting unemployment at the moment. We're also being harassed and being pressured to sign new leases. They told me that they lost my lease, and tried to pressure me into signing a new one lately. I did not believe that they lost my lease, and I refused to sign another. The new lease looked strange, not like the old ones. They're trying to trick us out of our housing. It's terrible what they're doing to us."

"I've lived here six years," said Sharon Grines, "and they want to move us out, but there is nothing wrong with my home. It may need to be painted, but I can live around that, and there is no reason to force me out of my home. I don't like it. I don't want to move. I want to stay, and raise my kids in Berkeley. I don't want to sign anything that gives up my housing."

Carolyn Evans said, "I've had two inspections in my home during the past two months, and I had to sign a new lease two months ago. It was the first time I had to sign a new lease in three to four years. I feel so sad that I am being displaced from my housing, and everyone else feels the same way. I've lived here for over 18 years, and I am afraid to say anything that might anger the housing authority."

Currently, across the nation, public housing is home to about three million seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families, and plays an essential role in providing services for the elderly poor and others. Public housing contributes significantly to local economies by the direct spending of $8.1 billion a year by PHAs on capital improvements, maintenance, and operations, and generates an additional $8.2 billion in indirect economic activity throughout the nation's communities.

Lynda Carson may be reached at tenantsrule@yahoo.com

A Long March Down Prison Road

March for California's Future becomes a trek past an endless row of prison towns

"I can't help but think that California, a state that's now down near the bottom in what it spends on education, is far and away the biggest spender on prisons. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to connect the dots." — retired teacher Gavin Riley

by David Bacon

Chowchilla, Calif. — High in the mountains overlooking Bakersfield and the south end of the San Joaquin Valley is a piece of California's past, the California Correctional Institution, or as inmates know it, Tehachapi.

It was one of the state's first big prisons, built at the height of the Great Depression in 1933 to contain the unraveling social fabric of Hoovervilles, high unemployment, a vast influx of Dust Bowl refugees, and left-wing political movements spreading like wildfire.

The penitentiary spreads across 1,650 acres of a remote desert valley. Designed for 2,785 inmates, it now holds 5,806 — 200 percent of an already inhumane standard. And while it was built as the original California Institute for Women, today its only inhabitants are men.

Jazzman Art Pepper, son of a Los Angeles longshoreman, lived in its cells for four and a half years in the 1950s. Like Pepper, today's prison inmates are mostly there because of drugs. Pepper would have recognized them for another reason. Tehachapi's inmates are almost all Black and Latino, like the rest of California's prisoners, and have been since the prison system began. And poor.

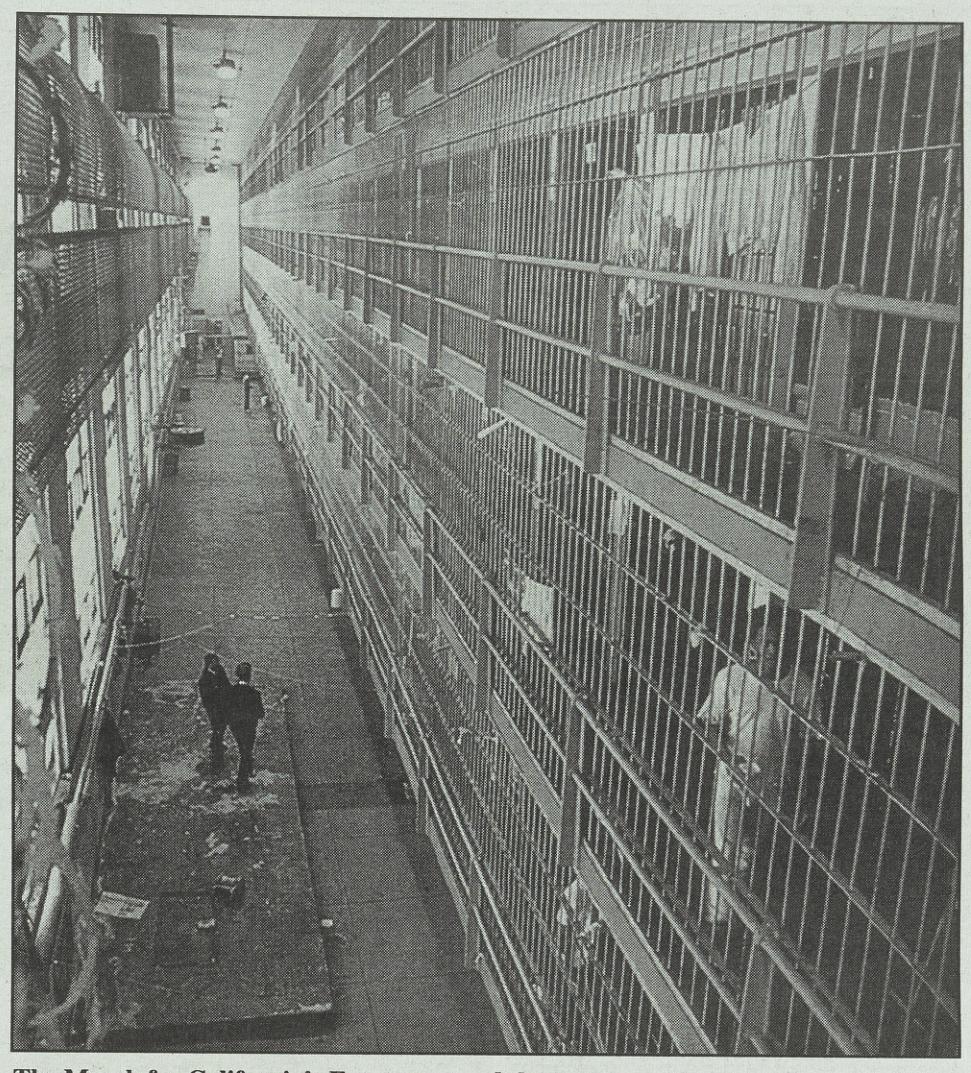
While Tehachapi was mentioned in *The Maltese Falcon,* people like Dashiell Hammett's middle-class grifters don't normally wind up there. Having no money is practically a requirement for residence.

When teachers and home-care workers rallied down below in Bakersfield on March 5, and kicked off the March for California's Future, few had more than a vague idea of the kind of presence Tehachapi and its fellow institutions would cast over them as they walked up the San Joaquin Valley to Sacramento.

They then spent 48 days in a traveling protest over the extreme budget cuts that have cost the jobs of thousands of California teachers, and threaten those of thousands of other public workers.

But while its participants may not have intended it, the March for California's Future became a march through California's prison towns. The explosive growth of communities based on incarceration also offers a vision of what California could become.

It's not the vision of the marchers, clearly, who want social change that makes prisons a lower priority than schools. But it is surely a vision of what life will become without that change — California's prison future.



The March for California's Future exposed the massive prison-industrial complex.

In their first week on the road, the hardy group, drawn mostly from the state's schools, walked by Kern Valley State Prison and North Kern State Prison in Delano, the first holding 5,013 inmates, and the second 5,390.

Delano was the birthplace of the United Farm Workers in 1965. Marchers celebrated the strike started by Filipinos that September and joined by the Mexicans led by Cesar Chavez two weeks later. A year afterwards, in 1966, the first great farmworkers' march left Delano for Sacramento, writing the grape strike into the nation's history books, and pulling together a union that eventually overcame the state's corporate growers in the seat of their power. The symbolism of those past events, and the profound effect they had on California's future, wasn't lost on today's marchers.

"I think about what those marches did for the farmworkers, in terms of insisting on basic human dignity," recalls marcher Jim Miller, a San Diego community college teacher. "So I think in that sense, we've chosen the perfect place to do this. Access to affordable education is a civil right. The purpose of this march is to make that more evident to the public."

For years, the UFW was headquartered at the Forty Acres outside of town, before it moved its offices into the mountains above Bakersfield, just a few miles from Tehachapi prison. The union still keeps its original hall on Garces Highway, but just a couple of miles away are the two new prisons, built in the 1990s.

Every day in Delano, 3,176 people go to work in the prisons. Almost as many of the town's families now depend on prison jobs as those supported by year-round field labor. Thousands of former farmworkers now guard other Latinos and blacks — inmates just as poor, but mostly from the urban centers of Los Angeles or San Jose, rather than the rural communities of the Central Valley.

Delano's population is 49,359. The two prisons hold more than 10,000 people. A third, smaller prison run by the city, the Delano Community Correctional Facility, contracts with the state to house an additional 600 inmates. Almost none can vote, so they're no threat to the political establishment that profits from their presence. But they do count when it's time to calculate Delano's population, and therefore its share of state revenue.

At the same time, although hundreds of prisoners may come from Compton, for instance, one of California's poorest cities in heavily black and Latino South Central Los Angeles, Compton can't claim them as residents in calculating its piece of the state pie. Prison-building places poor communities in competition with each other, and Delano gains an advantage from housing Compton's lost souls. But it is competition over a pie that's shrinking quickly.

The Kern Valley State Prison and North Kern State Prison have a combined annual budget of $294 million. By comparison, the town's 2010 General Fund was a tenth of that, and the budget of its public schools a twentieth. Delano's median family income is just over $29,000, with almost 30 percent of its residents living below the poverty line.

Wasco State Prison is just up the highway, incarcerating 5,989 people, and employing 1,688, at an annual cost of $201 million. Wasco's population is 25,665.

Across the wide valley to the west are two more prisons. Avenal State Prison holds 6,577 people, with a staff of 1,517 and an annual budget of $144 million. To the north, Pleasant Valley State Prison houses 5,188 inmates and 1,388 guards, spending $195 million every year. These are even smaller towns. In the 2000 census, Avenal boasted a population of 15,689, but had counted the 7,062 inmates at that time as residents. The census count in Coalinga, home of the Pleasant Valley prison, was 11,668.

In nearby McFarland, marcher Jenn Laskin, a continuation school teacher from Watsonville, talked to a fellow teacher about to lose her job. "She worked three jobs to put herself through school," Laskin reported. "She's in her second year, which means that on the first day of next year she'd have had tenure and couldn't have been laid off. So she's being laid off this year instead.

"Her family's lived in McFarland for five generations. Her father's been a custodian for the district there for 23 years. Without a job, there won't be anything to keep her in the community where she grew up. The closest place to look for work is Bakersfield, where they just issued 200 pink slips, and many highly qualified teachers are fighting for the same job."

That McFarland teacher is the victim of cuts in the state's education budget. Another $18 billion will be sliced from it this year. California is one of only three states with a requirement that two-thirds of the legislature approve any budget. Even more important, any tax increase takes a two-thirds vote as well.

So, even though urban Democrats have had a majority for years in both chambers of the legislature, a solid Republican bloc can keep the state in a continual economic crisis until Democrats agree to slash spending. With huge deficits from declining tax revenues, and a recession boosting state unemployment over 12.5 percent, a

See **March Down Prison Road** *page 7*

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May 2010

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Street Spirit

Street Spirit is published by **American Friends Service Committee.** The vendor program is run by **BOSS (Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency).**

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Take Back the Land: *What We Are Doing Is Illegal*

A campaign of housing takeovers confronts the banks, police and government

Editor's Note: Max Rameau is a founding member of the Miami-based Take Back the Land, a group of housing activists who have taken over vacant buildings and blocked the eviction of families from foreclosed homes. This article is based on a presentation Rameau recently gave in Oakland, as edited by *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, a journal for social and environmental justice published by Urban Habitat. See their Spring 2010 issue at www.urbanhabitat.org/rpe

Housing activists in Miami took over vacant land and built a shantytown called Umoja Village. Photo courtesy Take Back the Land

by Max Rameau

We have been doing our Take Back The Land activities in Miami since the summer of 2006. Our work began in response to the gentrification of low-income housing. We recognized that we could no longer depend on the government to solve the problems with extreme gentrification and extreme housing prices in our community because they were an integral part of the problem. So we decided to start a new organization and focus our attention on the internal capacities of our community, rather than figure out what the government can do for us.

Take Back The Land is a collective with a leadership of about five — myself and four women. There's a larger group of about 20 that we can call on at any time. Given the nature of what we're doing, it's very difficult to build a mass organization because at its core, what we are doing is illegal. We can't have public meetings to say that we're going to break into *this* house on *this* date. There are just too many logistical and legal repercussions. Also, we did not want to seek funding. We got one grant, which we transferred to a nonprofit partner. So, there's no staff and no budget to speak of.

In October 2006, we took over a vacant piece of land and built the Umoja Village shantytown in Miami, Fla. [See sidebar on Umoja Village.] It stood for six months before falling to a suspicious fire.

We felt that we had built a model, but it lacked long-term viability because we had no public policy component to what we were doing. In fact, we had explicitly taken an anti-public policy stance.

So, when the Miami City Manager sent one of his minions over to say, "How can we resolve this?" I said, we're going to give you our demands. When he took out his pen, we said, "We want you to get off our property!" That was our only demand. We felt then — and until recently — that we specifically did not want to have any engagement with the government. But we also did not have a public policy piece or alternative institutions in place.

You can't build the movement or create social change that way.

The Opportunity of Crisis

Today, because of the economic and political crisis, we are at a historic point where people are willing to rethink their relationship to the land, the economic system, and the financial system in a way that they were unwilling or unable to do before. If we had tried to do land takeovers five or six years ago, we would have been kicked out by our own neighbors. Now we get great press and community support.

Things that seemed crazy and not possible five years ago suddenly are relevant and mainstream. Consequently, this opens up an opportunity for the social justice movement to offer viable alternatives.

In broad terms, our goal is to fundamentally transform land relationships — the way people, governments, and corporations relate to land and to one another [in relation to land]. We believe that it's possible in our lifetime.

If we engage in a protracted, vigorous and broad political campaign, we can win vast public policy changes, possibly even amendments to state constitutions, which would make housing a human right. A second major goal we can pursue is to introduce new political leadership — particularly people of color, low-income people of color, and specifically, black women.

Building a National Movement

We are now trying to build a national Take Back The Land movement, bigger and different from the one in Miami where we were able to take advantage of specific situations and benefit from them. We want to build something flexible enough for people to apply those principles in their own communities.

The U.S. Human Rights Network is coordinating the national effort. We have signed on 10 organizations in 10 cities focused on elevating housing to the level of a human right, and at least in the initial stages, on the path of direct action: housing defense and liberations.

We think it extremely important to use direct action to challenge the prevailing paradigm around land and land relationships. Consequently, breaking the laws that support the paradigm is a critical part of our model. It's a tactic designed to reach something bigger, which is to advance public policy initiatives that elevate housing to the level of a human right.

Our position is that progressive public policy in the United States is effectively dead because we cannot move it. And the reason for that is that we have no real leverage; meaning, we have no money to give to public officials. What we do have is our labor and this sense that we should be able to stay in the buildings, and in the homes. Since we have no viable leverage to advance progressive public policy, we have to go on a hard, direct action binge.

Ultimately, our objective is bigger social change through public policy, but I don't think we can get to that without the direct action. But first, we need a plan. What do we do after we win? In Miami, we were unprepared to cope with victory.

In fact, that happened with the home of the Trody family, which was featured in the Michael Moore film [*Capitalism: A Love Story*]. The bank sent the Trodys a second eviction notice a few months ago, and of course, the next day we were there, ready to take arrests, defending the family's right to stay. One of our leaders called the bank — U.S. Bank, which got $6.6 billion in bailout funds from the federal government — and after a couple of negotiating sessions, the bank offered us the house for $1.

But we had no way to accept the house. Not only did we not have an organization that could deal with victory, we weren't even clear about what that organization or model should look like. So now, as we build the movement to the point where we have those victories, we need to concurrently build the alternative institutions that can sustain those victories.

The Direct Action Model: How to Affect Banks

To bring about this kind of social transformation, we have to make it affect the financial self-interests of the financial sector and the government, which also controls large amounts of properties.

We can start by focusing on one bank — Citibank or Bank of America. Say they own $10 billion worth of toxic assets. First they spend money to do a foreclosure, then they spend money to do an eviction, then they spend more money to board the house up, and some more on upkeep and blight abatement. Then somebody moves into the vacant house and they have to spend money on evicting them and boarding up the place all over again.

If we can occupy 10,000 of these homes, the cost of repossessing all of them will be prohibitive. At some point, the banks will recognize that it is in their financial interest to just hand the places over to nonprofits. By taking the $10 billion in tax write-offs they will actually come out ahead, financially.

Our direct action has to make it so the banks have a clear financial interest in giving away the foreclosed homes rather than continuing to spend money on getting back properties they supposedly own.

How to Affect Government

It used to be that when they put a 24-hour eviction notice on someone's door in Miami, it meant that the police would come the next day or the day after. Now it takes the police seven to 14 business days to follow up on an eviction notice. That's how backlogged they are.

The Trody family was evicted on a Friday. They spent the weekend in their truck, and we moved them back into the same house on Monday. Seven police cars and eight police showed up in response and stayed for about two hours, but then left without doing an eviction. That happened on February 23, 2009, and the family is still in the house.

If we can mount this kind of action even 10 percent of the time — where they will

See **Take Back the Land** *page 6*

Umoja Village Shantytown

The Umoja Village Shantytown was founded on Oct. 23, 2006, in the Liberty City section of Miami, Florida, in response to gentrification and a lack of low-income housing. "Umoja" is Swahili for "unity," hence "Unity Village."

After months of planning, Take Back the Land seized control of a lot (on the corner of 62nd St. and NW 17th Ave. in Miami) that had been vacant for about eight years after low-income housing there was demolished by the city. Take Back the Land erected several tents and wood-frame shanties to provide housing for homeless people in the area.

Police, City of Miami and Miami-Dade County officials were unable to evict the residents or organizers because of a 1996 settlement with the ACLU that forbids the arrest of homeless people on public land when there are no beds for them in city shelters.

By December, Umoja Village housed approximately 50 homeless people who ran the village democratically. The village enjoyed broad support in the community, so was able to successfully repel numerous attempts by government officials to tear it down.

On April 23, 2007, Umoja Village celebrated its six-month milestone with the following actions: the replacement of wood shanties with more durable structures; the building of a water well; participation in local anti-gentrification and pro-housing campaigns; a demand for legal rights to the land from the city; and plans to acquire land and build low-income housing.

On April 26, 2007, the day that the first new structures were scheduled to be built, Umoja Village burned to the ground in a mysterious fire. There were no casualties or injuries but Miami police took the opportunity to arrest 11 residents and activists for attempting to remain on the land and the city erected a barbed wire fence around the property that same day.

To ward off more protests, the city initially offered the property to Take Back the Land to build low-income housing, but later reneged on its offer under pressure from local power brokers and lobbyists.

For more information on Umoja Village, see the Take Back the Land website: http://takebacktheland.blogspot.com/

The media virtually ignored the thousands who joined this huge rally against state budget cuts, held in front of the State Capitol on April 21. Mark Copelan photo

Berkeley's teachers and unions, including the Berkeley Federation of Teachers, worked together to fill five buses to attend the rally in Sacramento. Mark Copelan photos

March for California's Future

from page 1

Before Gov. Schwarzenegger's latest cuts, California ranked 47th in the nation per pupil spending. Now critics predict it will be closer to 49th. Adult schools, the last safety net for those who "have been left behind" are being closed throughout the state, increasing the likelihood of more costly incarceration, noted Berkeley Adult School Educator Lynn Kalmar at Wednesday's rally.

Among other cuts to parks and public services affecting children, the poor and elderly, the governor has threatened to eliminate the In-Home Supportive Services Program, employing 65,000 of the state's in-home care workers and jeopardizing the lives of the disabled they care for.

Yet this is "the richest state in the richest country in the world," says the Berkeley Federation of Teachers. The math doesn't add up. At the Capitol rally, Marty Hittelman, president of the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), attributed California's woes to the absence of a progressive tax system requiring the ultra-rich to pay their "fair share."

CFT spokesperson Fred Glass explained, "Taxes for the wealthiest have been steadily reduced even though the top one percent of taxpayers in California [averaging $1.6 million in annual income] has nearly doubled its share of adjusted gross income since 1993 from 13.8 percent to 25.2 percent in 2007... The state income tax rate of this super-rich group has been pared during that time from 11.3 percent to 9.3 percent, robbing the state of $3 to $6 billion each year. Another $9 to $10 billion in annual revenues have been whittled away through corporate tax reductions."

According to Alternet's David DeGraw, "The poorest one-fifth of the population pay more than eleven percent of their income in taxes, whereas the top one percent earning an average of more than two million dollars a year, are paying about seven percent."

Over the last 60 years, the federal income tax levied on those earning more than $400,000 has dropped nearly 20 percent, according to a recent report by the Institute for Policy Studies.

Apparently, not everyone in our nation is suffering from the recession. DeGraw pointed out that the United States has the highest inequality in the industrialized world. According to *Forbes*, in the first full year of the economic crisis, the wealth of the 400 richest U.S. men increased by $30 billion. This, said DeGraw, brings "their total combined wealth to $1.56 trillion, which is more than the combined net worth of 50 percent of the U.S. population."

In 2007, the top 1 percent held 43 percent of U.S. financial wealth, according to UC Santa Cruz Professor G. William Domhoff. It is tempting to reason that were this wealth divided among the remaining 90 percent, it would likely be almost twice as wealthy. Instead, Gov. Schwarzenegger and Republican lawmakers led the charge in recent budget negotiations to further cut corporate taxes by $2 billion a year, according to Judy Lin (AP) in the *San Jose Mercury News*.

To help remedy this situation, State Assembly representative Alberto Torrico has authored AB 656 that will levy a 12.5 percent extraction fee on oil companies that currently don't pay a dime in taxes to extract California's oil. The revenues would generate nearly $2 billion a year for the state's colleges and universities.

"Even Sarah Palin's Alaska and George W. Bush's Texas levy an oil severance fee," said Torrico in an opinion piece in the *San Jose Mercury News*. "California is the only oil-producing state that continues to miss the opportunity to generate funds with a fair oil severance fee."

At present, the Assembly Bill is likely to fall short of the two-thirds majority vote needed to raise taxes since Proposition 13 passed in 1978. This is why rally organizers are calling on citizens to sign UC Berkeley Professor George Lakoff's petition for a ballot measure that will change the two-thirds voting threshold to a simple majority for the Legislature to pass budgets and to impose higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

But while this legislation is desperately needed as a quick fix, were César Chávez still alive, he might caution its supporters about turning over all their power to the legislature instead of building a movement willing to engage in direct action, strikes, sit-ins and boycotts.

When the California Legislature created the Agricultural Labor Relations Board in 1975, the United Farm Workers (UFW) was forced to give up wildcat strikes and secondary boycotts. Growers used legal loopholes in the union election rules to drag out negotiations for years and avoid signing contracts with the UFW.

As for the media blackout on the March for California's Future, one need only inquire whether the owners of the newspapers and stations are in that top one-percent earning more than 1.6 million dollars a year, to know whether they stand for a more equitable tax distribution or prefer that this story disappear.

More information on the March for California's Future is available at www.fight4cafuture.com.

Margot Pepper can be found at http://www.margotpepper.com and http://freedomvoices.org/new/node/93.

Resisting War and Its Propaganda Machinery

In order for war to become a thing of the past, individuals must collectively be determined to defy the will of dictators and governments.

by Jack Bragen

"Study For A War Monument." Engraving by Art Hazelwood from "Hubris Corpulentus."

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, President Barack Obama said, "Sometimes war is a necessity..." When I heard those words and was aware of the context in which they were spoken, in the back of my mind, I knew something was wrong.

The human species is plagued by its supposed need for war. War has been with us since the beginning of recorded history, and today threatens to overtake, engulf and obliterate the human species. It is a common misconception that, first of all, war is sometimes needed, and second, that war is an inevitable component of humanity.

War threatens to kill the human species and destroy the planet it lives on. There has to be another, more advanced way to respond when someone initiates hostilities. We must discover it for the sake of our survival.

In our recent past, it was necessary for the United States to go to war to stop the spread of Nazism. We were dealing with a dictator in the process of attempted genocide not only of the Jews, but also the disabled, persons of other than heterosexual orientation, homeless and unemployed people, as well as the execution of anyone who disagreed with them, and of any people who didn't look and act like them. This was a fairly clear-cut situation in which a fascist dictator needed to be stopped.

In today's world, it seems that nothing is clear-cut. It is not obvious in the wars of today which side is the aggressor, and which side is simply exercising self-defense. Inevitably, both sides of a conflict will claim virtue and will portray their opponent as horrible and inhumane, in order to gain worldwide support. The public doesn't have access to the actual facts of these situations, short of going there and observing firsthand.

In today's world, in which a minute amount of effort can trigger massive, or even universal destruction, we need to have all parties back off from threatening war on their neighbors, and on their own citizens. The human species needs to evolve into a state of peace, and if it fails to do so, we will all perish.

In the United States, a war cannot be fought without a certain amount of support from the general public. When U.S. government officials decide they want to go to war, they must first sell the idea to the American people.

A necessary part of it is to convince the public that we are under a dire threat, that our way of life is in jeopardy, and that we must begin the bombing immediately, or face our demise. The "enemy" that our state wants to battle must be seen by the public as immoral, violent, inhumane, and inhuman, people we must fear, and not as a people who could otherwise be our friends.

I have great respect for President Obama. He is a lot more presidential than his predecessor and has already accomplished much. Strangely enough, waging war in the Middle East is a much easier sell for a Democratic president. Obama's popularity among liberals has done much to calm the antiwar movement.

It seems the current administration is giving us much the same medicine as Bush, only the pills are sugarcoated, instead of bitter. The pressures on the president exerted by big money and the mega-corporations that control much of society, including the oil companies, one cannot know unless in the president's office. One doesn't know in what ways those in power would retaliate if Obama really rocked the boat, as he promised to do in his campaign.

This is why a real grassroots movement is so necessary, the very movement that Obama initiated when he ran for president. It is a movement that I predict will become something much bigger than simply electing Obama.

In order for war to become a thing of the past, individuals must collectively be determined to defy the will of dictators and governments. These are entities that don't stand to lose anything from the outcome of war, leaving it up to individuals to become maimed or lose their lives while in the process of doing their government's bidding. The public can begin by disbelieving what the propaganda machine tells us, and in fact, by becoming skeptics of our own assumptions and thought patterns.

who's extinct?

by Randy Fingland

privatization =
corporatization =
degradation =
globalization =
genocidization =
profitization =
chemicalization =
civilization checkmate =
planet reconstructs =
military-industrial complex death

Futuristic

by Claire J. Baker

Picture the hawk of war
surrendering to the dove.
Envision the hawk of war
unfeathered from the gore,
perished & limp as a glove.

Take Back the Land

from page 4

have to bring in seven police cars — it will back up the foreclosure/eviction process even more. The municipalities and counties will then be motivated to support turning the properties over.

Our Vision for the Future

If we had a whole new world, what would it look like?

We need alternative structures for control. Land trusts and co-ops are a good base to build from, but we need to go further. If we're going to fundamentally transform the economy as a whole so that housing is de-commodified, we will need to develop alternative financial structures, such as community-controlled credit unions. At present, we think about land and ownership in two ways: private and public. We would like to establish a third method of ownership where the community would have some level of control over the land without government involvement.

So, we are asking organizations to join us by amplifying the work that they are already doing and encouraging them to take it up to the next level.

In May 2010, we want to have organizations doing liberations or defenses in several areas. Our goal is to help 100 families in a nationwide campaign where we either move them into places that were previously vacant, or defend them against eviction. If we don't do this in a real way, by this time next year we will have missed our chance.

Resisting Sit/Lie Laws

from page 2

"Hardball" that people can be profiled by their shoes. Liberal radio commentator Mike Malloy observed sardonically that Mexicans arrive in ragged shoes after walking hundreds of miles across the desert. They work like dogs to buy a pair of sneakers. That's how you spot them, he quipped.

The key similarity between San Francisco's sit/lie law and Arizona's ban on immigrants is that in both cases, police discretionary powers are broadened, allowing them to issue citations in San Francisco or make arrests in Arizona, using arbitrary "common sense" judgment.

Currently, San Francisco's Municipal Police Code 6.11 states officers must "be able to articulate specific facts that support every element of Penal Code Section 647c and Municipal Police Code Section 22 before taking enforcement action."

Penal Code 647c establishes as a misdemeanor willful and malicious obstruction of "normal access to public places."

Municipal Police Code Section 22 is intended to be enforced "when a person persists in willfully and substantially obstructing the free movement of another person in a public place." MPC Section 22 states, "When enforcing either law, the issue is the obstruction, not drunkenness, streetwalking, or any other suspicious or illegal activity." And certainly not one's race or housing status.

On April 21, labor activist Gabriel Haaland introduced to the Democratic County Central Committee (DCCC) a resolution opposing the proposed sit/lie law with its broader discretionary powers and pointing to the redundancy of sit/lie in the face of these pre-existing police laws and penal codes prohibiting sidewalk obstruction and pedestrian harassment.

Before the DCCC overwhelmingly voted against sit/lie, one wry observer joked, "When can you ever rely on the police for common sense?"

If it is, on its face, redundant and discriminatory in its use of police profiling, what is the ultimate purpose of the ordinance? Are *San Francisco Chronicle* columnists like C.W. Nevius, who was present for the DCCC vote against the sit/lie law, promoting San Francisco big-money interests by using the sit/lie crackdown as a tough-on-crime wedge issue to turn voters against "left-wing Democrats" in the November Supervisor election?

Are Mayor Newsom and Police Chief Gascón copying the trend of U.S. cities like New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Portland toward granting the police broader discretionary powers as pre-emptive crowd-control measures in an increasingly unstable economy where people are enraged by corporations and banks "too big to fail"?

Whatever the answer, on April 24, during the second "Sidewalks Are For People" event, members of my group climbed to the top of the hill outside Newsom's fashionable Upper Haight hacienda. We were carrying a portable grill for a repeat of the March 27, "No On Sit/Lie Barbecue" on that spot.

The last time was fun. Today was a beautiful day. We were hungry. However, somehow the SFPD knew we were coming. Despite our "normal" appearance, they singled us out as we climbed the hill. A few doors from the mayor's home, police cars blocked the way. An officer, flanked by three others, stopped us.

We watched them escort passers-by down the sidewalk on which we were forbidden to tread. One was a slim, blonde jogger. Another carried a shopping bag from a high-end clothing store. We asked the SFPD why they did not roust people we had passed on the way whose garage sale was a clear obstruction. The mild-mannered, not unfriendly sergeant said simply, "I can't be everywhere at once."

He would allow us to assemble across the street, but not fire up the grill. He said a barbeque-style party could spin "out of control." He expressed concern for the mayor's safety, especially near open matchbooks or flames. The mayor's home sits on a rise high above the street, fronted by a barrier wall impossible to climb.

We asked him to divulge whether a citizen's complaint had been registered with the SFPD. The officer declined to answer. Whether or not Newsom was peeking out at us from behind his curtains at the top of that alabaster wall, his response to our attempt to reclaim "his sidewalk" below was crystal clear.

Feeling profiled as "unruly activists," we lugged our grill back down the hill to Haight and Cole where someone etched beautiful pink, white, yellow and blue chalk drawings and letters on the sidewalk saying, "Stand Against Sit/Lie."

We milled around talking, cooked great food, and partied with the rest of the Haight Street "thugs."

Long March Down Prison Road

from page 3

budgetary crisis is not difficult to create.

Nowhere is unemployment higher than in California's rural counties, often twice as high as on the coast. Small agricultural towns like Delano and McFarland are filled with workers who can't find jobs, while at the same time budget cuts reduce the social services for unemployed families, and shower teachers in the local schools with pink slips.

When marchers talk about the state's future, some of them remember a time when, at least for some residents, the system had a more functional social contract.

"I view myself as a legacy of the California system when it worked," remembers marcher Gavin Riley, a retired teacher from a district on the border of Los Angeles and Orange County. "I went to school in the 1950s when our school system was ranked as one of the best in the nation. When it was my time to go to college, the state university was free.

"The theory back then was that if we had an educated electorate, they'd be more productive, more supportive of the state. People wouldn't get in trouble. I think that worked, at least for me. They gave me a free education, and I came back and worked my entire life teaching in our schools. I think I've more than returned the investment. But we've kind of lost track of that. At one time we were a selfless society in California. We seem to have become more selfish. That's unfortunate, because we're losing track of the dream."

For Maria S. the dream is harder to attain than ever. She came from Mexico to Bakersfield as a teenager, and after a terrible accident, has been in a wheelchair ever since. Nevertheless, she got her GED at adult school while working, and then an AA degree at Bakersfield College.

But when it came time to move on to California State University in Bakersfield, the free education given to Riley wasn't even a memory. Instead, she found that budget cuts had produced a tuition fee of $1,700 for each quarter. "With a bachelor's degree in mathematics, I'll be the first in my family to achieve a higher education," she said. "But I still haven't been able to raise the funds, so I'm not going to school this winter. Tuition has become so high I can't afford it. As an immigrant, I have to pay more, and I get no financial aid."

Immigration reform would certainly help solve some of her problems, but as a federal issue, it's not really in the direct purview of the marchers, even though they're sympathetic. But the money question is. The state's universities won't get more funding and tuition won't move back toward where it was in the 1950s without political change in Sacramento.

Of course, even those good memories of the 1950s are only shared by some of the state's residents. That was also the period of Cold War loyalty oaths, when many teachers refused to denounce their coworkers for left-wing ideas, and were fired. Jazz musicians like Art Pepper went to jail, in part because they took drugs, but also because most were black artists in a black community patrolled by the Los Angeles Police Department like an occupying army. And before the Delano grape strike, growers brought in contract bracero workers from Mexico every year, sending them back across the border once the work was done.

The San Joaquin Valley has its bitter racial memories. Just north of Delano and McFarland, marchers came upon Allensworth, a town founded in 1908 by African-Americans, in the period before World War I when lynchings were common and the Klan rode high in the South.

Colonel Allen Allensworth founded a utopian community in response, in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, taking to heart Booker T. Washington's advice to meet racism by building independence and self-sufficiency. Its streets were named for Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

The colony failed, and for years the tiny settlement it left behind lay stranded next to Highway 99. Reacting to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ed Pope, a surveyor for the California Department of Parks and Recreation, began a campaign that led in 1976 to a state park re-creating the African-American utopia.

Last year the park was closed by budget cuts. More African-Americans now live in just one of the prisons near Allensworth than ever lived in the town itself. Meanwhile, most of the 120 families residing next to the state park are Mexican immigrants, sleeping in trailers. They have no sure source of water (which helped doom the utopia long ago), and no store or gas station.

"We've seen boarded-up homes everywhere. In Fresno, we walked through a Skid Row area where people were living in cardboard and wood shacks underneath a freeway, sleeping on the sidewalks. We've seen farms where the land is fallow and the trees have been allowed to die. About the only thing we've seen great growth in, is prisons."

As marchers headed up the road, they passed the prison that became a national symbol for abuse of inmates — California State Prison in Corcoran (5,544 inmates, 2,322 staff, $270 million budget). A 1996 *Los Angeles Times* article by Mark Arax stated that guards there had shot and killed more inmates than in any other prison nationwide.

In addition, they'd staged fights between inmates, called "gladiator days." 60 Minutes even showed a video of an inmate killed by guards in 1994. Finally, eight guards and supervisors were indicted, but were acquitted in 2000.

Corcoran has a second prison as well, the Substance Abuse Treatment Facility (7,628 inmates, 1,786 staff, $230 million budget). Despite the jobs in the two facilities, however, Corcoran, like most Valley towns, has much higher unemployment than the state's average — 19 percent.

The general fund budget for the Corcoran schools last year was $29 million — like Delano, a twentieth of the budgets of its two prisons. The penitentiaries are giant behemoths in towns like Corcoran, with spending that dwarfs schools or city services. Yet for all the promise of jobs, they don't make much of a dent in the joblessness endemic to rural California.

Going by prison after prison was especially heartwrenching for Irene Gonzalez, who joined the march, not as a teacher, but as a worker in the criminal justice system. She looks at the institutions, and knows not just who they house but the people who work there. She doesn't see them as enemies, or people sucking up budget dollars that should really go elsewhere.

"In the probation department in Los Angeles, where I work, we service the community in rehabilitating minors and adults, and a lot of our services are being cut, too," she explained. "We used to give referrals, and could provide help in getting jobs or developing reading skills. But with the cuts we can't do that any longer."

She predicts a social explosion if the state's priorities aren't changed. "It should not cost us an arm and a leg to send our kids through college, or to go there ourselves. What they're going to have is more people living on the streets," she said.

"These legislators say they're against crime, but then they take away people's jobs and homes. What do they expect?" She's the angriest of the marchers. "It's time for us to start standing up and fighting back," she vows. "We're going to make sure you hear us, and hear us loud."

Chowchilla, which marchers passed a few days later, is also the site of two prisons, Valley State Prison for Women (3,810 inmates, 1,058 staff and $125 million budget) and the Central California Women's Facility (3,918 inmates, 1,208 staff, and $153 million budget). It is one of the main towns in the district of Assemblyman Tom Berryhill. Tom and his brother Bill represent adjacent districts in the State Assembly.

Tom, a fourth-generation farmer, lives in Modesto, home of the Gallo wine empire. Not surprisingly, he's a law-and-order advocate, campaigning for the rights of crime victims and for speedier application of the death penalty. Last year, the California Rural Crime Prevention Task Force named him "Legislator of the Year."

His brother Bill Berryhill, from Stockton and Ceres to the north, sits on the board of the Allied Grape Growers. Both inherited their membership in the political class here from their father, legendary Republican legislator Clare Berryhill. For the Berryhills, prison construction is an economic development strategy, and they point to its role in creating local jobs.

Bill Berryhill bemoans that Stockton's schools have just sent out 192 layoff notices. But turning reality on its head, the budget cuts demanded by the Berryhills and their colleagues are not responsible, they say. The culprits are taxes and regulations on business. "While the state flirts with tax increases, our agricultural, trucking and educational sectors continue to decline," he fumes.

One of their allies is State Senator Jeff Denham, whose district not only includes a large chunk of the San Joaquin Valley but stretches across the mountains to the neighboring Salinas Valley, fondly referred to by agribusiness as "the nation's salad bowl."

The valley is also home to one of the state's most famous prisons, Soledad, where George Jackson wrote *Soledad Brother* in 1970. It is actually two prisons, the Salinas Valley State Prison and the Correctional Training Facility. Together, they house 11,552 people, employ 3,195 guards and other personnel, and spend a combined budget of $327 million.

Denham gets an A-plus rating from the Howard Jarvis Taxpayer Association, architects of the tax-cutting policy that is driving the state into astronomical debt, and a 100 percent perfect score from the California Taxpayers Association. Neither association is worried about the tax burden of prisons, however.

Behind these legislators is the most extreme element of the state's Republican Party, the California Republican Assembly. They only gave the Berryhills 67 percent ratings. Abel Maldonado, a Republican who voted to break the Republican-engineered budget deadlock last session, got 22 percent, lower than some Democrats.

The Stanislaus County GOP, an active participant in the Assembly and part of the Berryhills' base, lists its principles as "smaller government, lower taxes, individual freedom, strong national security, respect for the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, the importance of family and the exceptionalism of America." It doesn't specifically mention prisons. It doesn't have to — support for them is just assumed.

The San Joaquin Valley finally ends in the great delta, drained and turned into farmland by Chinese contract laborers 150 years ago. At the confluence of the rivers flowing out of the San Joaquin Valley to the south, and the Sacramento Valley to the north, is Sacramento, the state capital. This was the marchers' goal.

The California Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the march's main organizers, brought out over 7,000 union members and community activists, who marched down the Mall to confront the legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in a huge rally on April 21. Before the marchers got there, though, they passed two juvenile prisons in Stockton (with an estimated 815 inmates, 960 staff and a budget of $132 million).

Just east of the Capitol is the prison made famous by Johnny Cash — Folsom State Prison. This also is a double institution, with a total of 7,676 inmates, 2,716 staff and a combined budget of $310 million. Deuel Vocational Institute to the west in Tracy rounds out the total San Joaquin Valley prison count. It has 3,748 inmates, 1,393 staff, and spends $189 million every year.

There are other prisons to the east and north, on the coast, and in rural areas throughout the state. But the total count for the San Joaquin Valley alone gives a prison population of 67,059 human beings incarcerated in 13 institutions, guarded by another 21,215 human beings, at a cost of $2.4 billion. No wonder there's no free education any more at state universities for Maria S. or anyone else.

The problem with California's future isn't just a bad voting system in Sacramento. That could be fixed by an initiative that the marchers, along with teachers unions, students, other labor organizations and community groups are putting on the ballot next November. If they win, budgets and tax increases will be adopted by simple majority vote, rather than two-thirds.

It will be easier to pass AB 560, a proposal by state Assemblyman Alberto Torrico to charge oil companies a royalty for the petroleum they pull from under California's soil. California is the only oil-producing state that doesn't charge the oil giants for what they take.

But giving more power to Democrats, and a better system for arriving at a budget deal, still won't reverse the state's priorities. California spends enormous sums jailing people, while finding few alternatives to incarceration, and slashing money for the education that might open other doors to the state's youth, especially its poorest. Democrats vote for prisons too.

"We've seen boarded-up homes everywhere," said Gavin Riley, describing the marchers' journey up the valley's prison road. "Coming into Fresno, we walked through a Skid Row area where people were living in cardboard and wood shacks underneath a freeway, sleeping on the sidewalks. We've seen farms where the land is fallow and the trees have been allowed to die. About the only thing we've seen great growth in, is prisons.

"We've walked by beautiful, wonderful prisons. I look at that and say, what a waste, not only of land but of people. I can't help but think that California, a state that's now down near the bottom in what it spends on education, is far and away the biggest spender on prisons. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to connect the dots."

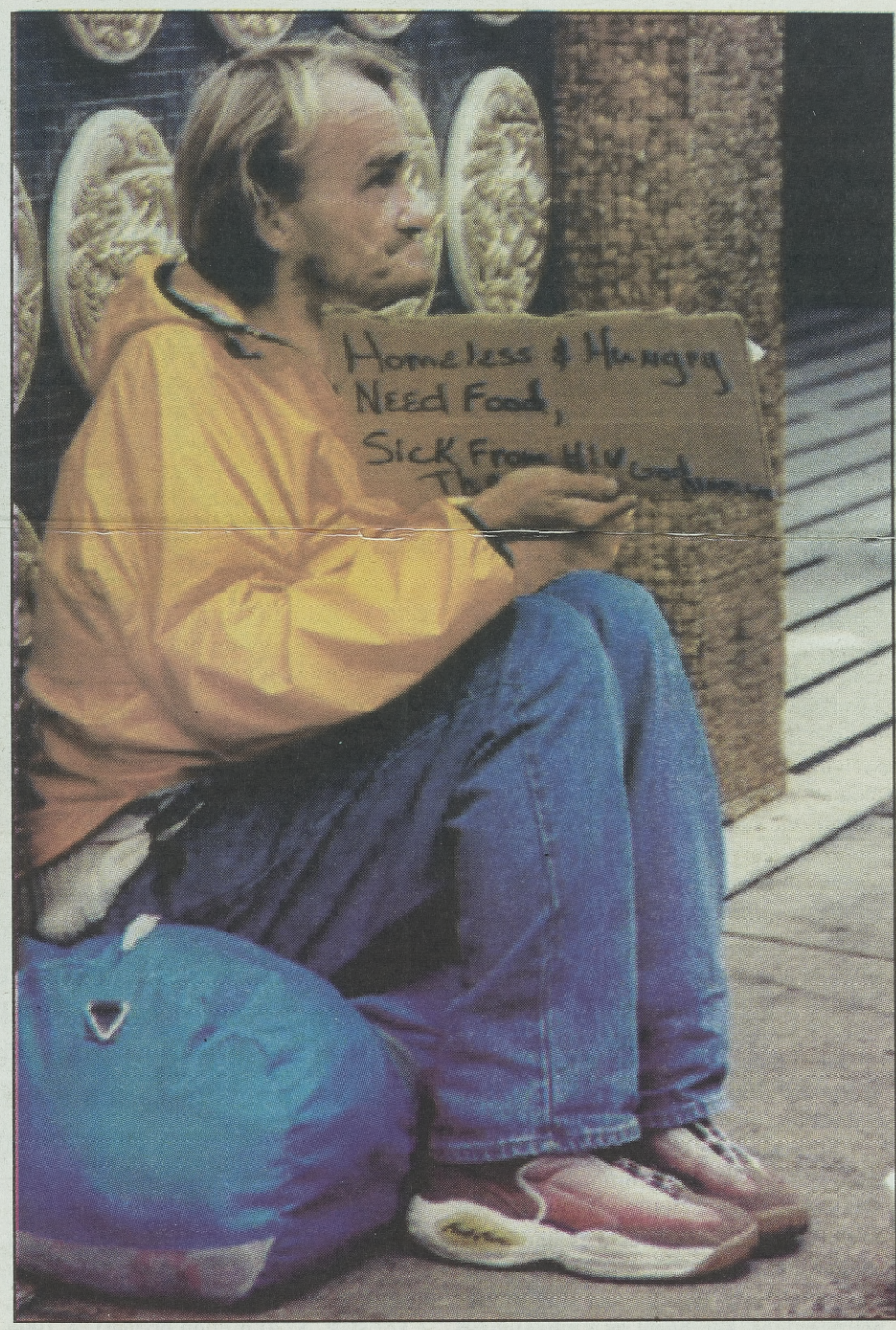
For more articles and images by David Bacon, see http://dbacon.igc.org.

The Great Recession

The U.S. economic collapse has jeopardized state and local governments from coast to coast, undermined schools and universities, and caused massive unemployment and homelessness.

The economic collapse has left homeless women living on the streets of San Francisco, where they face increased risk of assault and rape, and are plagued by health problems that shorten their life expectancy.

Photos by Robert Terrell



A sick, disabled, emaciated man tries to survive on the streets of San Francisco.

from page 1

As is the case in many other states in the nation, those implementing budgetary reductions are targeting California's primary and secondary educational systems. Thousands of classroom teachers across the state have been fired. And academic programs are being ruthlessly eliminated with little thought being given to the disastrous impact that such reductions will have on the long-term prospects of students, their families and communities.

Draconian cuts are also being made across the board in California's institutions of higher education. Valuable degree programs are being eliminated, essential purchases have been halted, and academic programs with little or nothing in common are being forced to merge — and parrot, as best they can, the allegation that being merged with strangers possessing diametrically opposed outlooks, agendas, values and cultures is a good thing.

As is the case in many sections of the nation, California's institutions of higher education are intentionally purging students. The chancellor of the California State University System has declared that he is intent on reducing enrollment by at least 40,000 students. Some of this is being accomplished via cuts in courses and programs. But the purge strategy is also being implemented via steady increases in tuition, penalties and fees.

In addition, California's public colleges and universities have fired thousands of professors during the past few months due to budgetary constraints. Moreover, all indications at this point are that the situation will get much worse before it begins to improve.

California's fiscal woes are not unique. Similar modes of triage are being implemented in education and citizen services by state governments in every part of the nation. The key point to be understood is that our overall economic system is undergoing a fundamental transition.

The housing sector can be cited in order to elaborate the point. Millions of homeowners, at least one in eight, are "underwater" on their mortgages. They are faced with the probability that they will never recoup the huge sums of hard-earned money that has vanished into thin air via reduced property values.

The dilemma of those caught in this particularly demoralizing situation is excruciating. If they attempt to tough it out by continuing to pay mortgages for properties that, in some areas of the nation, are now worth less than 50 percent of their former assessed value, they risk ending up throwing good money after bad, a hopeless situation.

Giving up, turning in the keys and walking away may save those experiencing this dilemma from the corrosive agony of their short-term pain. But negative consequences will haunt them for many years to come via the intentionally punishing impact of onerous, expensive, cumulative penalties levied by financial bounty hunters deployed by the government-bailed-out financial institutions that hold their mortgages.

Some of those caught in this demoralizing trap are hoping to reverse their sinking financial fortunes by working harder for longer hours in order to acquire a modicum of fiscal leverage. But this will not prove to be a winning strategy for the vast majority of those seeking to put it into action.

This is primarily due to the fact that the United States currently has one of the tightest job markets in living memory. As a result, tens of millions of people are jobless, with few prospects of obtaining adequate employment any time soon. Depressed and discouraged by their poor prospects, millions have simply given up the search for employment.

Some of those who fall into the latter category are currently homeless. Moreover, without a highly improbable massive expansion in the economy, it is inevitable that the number of homeless people living and dying in primitive circumstances on the nation's streets will substantially increase.

Despite crude, insensitive, and frequently irrational Republican opposition, the Obama administration, supported by the frequently hapless Democratic majority in Congress, is making modest progress in the uphill struggle to stabilize the economy, and promote policies that will hopefully produce more decent jobs that pay adequate living wages.

But progress on this front is minimal. Thus, those who are in most need of jobs and additional financial resources are being provided little assistance, or none at all. Moreover, it is painfully obvious to those who fall into this category that the fervent passion that government officials exuded when the big banks and Wall Street were threatened with collapse is nowhere to be seen with regard to the manner in which they are addressing the expanding financial morass which entraps hapless members of the middle and lower classes.

In any event, I am encumbered by the strong, persistent, impression that virtually all of the public officials entrusted with responsibility for implementing policies designed to improve the nation's overall economic performance are missing the boat. At best, the nation's political leaders are attempting to get the economy back to where it was before the crash that shook the foundations of the global trading system.

But this will not prove possible, and they are bound to experience failure as long as they pursue this objective. This is due to the fact that the recent Great Recession was great indeed, because it formally demarcated the moment when the nation's chickens began coming home to roost in earnest regarding the declining economic and military strength of the U.S. Empire.

Wars are costly affairs, and this is particularly the case when they are not decisively won. President George W. Bush, and the neo-conservative buccaneers who had his ear, rolled the dice in Iraq in an effort to cop a cheap, easy, vastly lucrative victory. Things obviously have not worked out as planned.

The United States has ended up having to pay hundreds of billions of dollars more than anticipated, due to the long-drawn-out insurgency that has kept Iraqis in agonizing turmoil since the Bush administration's ill-advised "shock and awe" attack that destroyed their government.

The insurgency continues, albeit in a subdued form, and the cost of the disastrous fiasco is still being tallied up in terms of dollars spent, diminished authority and clout for the United States in world affairs, and a bruised national economy that has left tens of millions of citizens unemployed, and millions of others facing homelessness.

The net result is that the United States is faced with a crisis of unprecedented size and complexity. Moreover, the nature of our problems is such that they will almost certainly metastasize unless far-reaching, fundamental reforms are implemented.

We can hope for the best. But my best sense is that many of us, those in the middle classes and below in particular, should begin planning for the worst because the economic infrastructure they have depended on up to this time to keep life and limb together is in tatters. As a result, the number of U.S. citizens who live in essentially Third World-type circumstances, on a more or less permanent basis, is going to grow during the years immediately ahead.

The key point to be understood is that the recent Great Recession was almost certainly engendered by a phenomenon that eventually will be recognized as a structural contraction of the U.S. economy vis-à-vis the rest of the world, China and India in particular.

Those responsible for administering government aren't willing to publicly acknowledge this fact. Nonetheless, everyone who is homeless understands this tragic truth, at least on a visceral level. It is also understood by the millions of people who are unemployed, and still millions more who are on the verge of losing their homes.

Given these stark realities, I am left wondering how long will it take for our largely clueless leadership class to recognize that we are faced with a systemic economic crisis of epic proportions, and begin to legislate accordingly?

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